English Society magazine Autumn 93 / issue 7

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NOAM CHOMSKY

Noam Chomsky, Professor of Linguistics and Philosophy at Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), should be best known to English students for his seminal work in generative grammar. Almost as soon as his academic career had begun, however, Chomsky was also publishing political work which challenged prevailing orthodoxies. Chomsky protested both in print and on the street against US military involvement in South East Asia in the 60s and quickly became the pariah of conservative opinion and a leading voice among dissenters - a position which has strengthened over the years.

Chomsky's criticism, which began by attacking US foreign policy, focuses on the mechanisms of power which serve and have served the West in its expansionist manouevering. Policies, such as the frequent interventions in Central America, can only be enacted with media support which, for its own self-serving purposes, accepts the decisions of the power brokers and justifies them to the public. Chomsky is, therefore, much concerned with 'alternative media' and sees his contributions as being a part of this.

His political books, far from being distancing theoretical works, are detailed factual accounts which offer alternative critical readings. Many of his conclusions or reinterpretations rely on a common sense approach based on strongly held libertarian values.

Chomsky sets out to demystify official rhetoric and to distil from it simple truths. In this way his writing and public speaking becomes widely accessible. Professor Chomsky is sceptical of intellectualising and thereby muddying clear issues. The educated classes have much to answer for when it comes to sustaining the status quo. Read on.....

The Interview

Your books of political analysis present a polemic which challenges the prevailing interpretation of events as given by Western governments and their media. Can such an iconoclastic reading, which is essentially a diagnostic and a reinterpretive one, claim to offer any alternative remedial possibilities?

The first step in changing a situation that one finds unacceptable is to come to understand it. My belief, right or wrong, is that the population generally will find the current situation with regard to interpretation of the world by ideological institutions (the media, journals of opinion, the intellectual community rather generally) completely unacceptable, in fact, outrageous, if they do come to understand it. Assuming that there is some merit in that belief, the first step towards "remedial possibilities" is what you describe as a "polemic"; I would choose different terms, but that's for others to judge. As for alternatives, I spend a good part of time and effort trying to help develop them. In fact, virtually everything I write, to which you refer, is part of an attempt to construct alternatives, through organizing efforts, alternative media and so on.

This reinterpretation necessarily involves addressing the question of ideology in language. Does the act of opposition compel the use of some other, oppositional ideolect?

I am somewhat uncomfortable with the assumptions that underlie the question. Frankly, I don't think anything beyond common sense is required to comprehend and overcome the radical distortions of the ideological institutions, including the way they use language. When government officials, corporations executives, media commentators and others speak with impressive passion about their dedication to "Jobs, Jobs, Jobs," it doesn't take a genius to understand that they are referring to "Profits, Profits, Profits." If the context of the remarks doesn't suffice, their actual behaviour certainly does. One can dress up the insight in complicated rhetoric if one likes, but I'd personally rather put the point, which is pretty elementary, in the monosyllables that it deserves. The only "oppositional idiolect" that is called for, in my opinion, is a dedication to trying to perceive and (to the extent one can) articulate simple truths -- which are, in fact, the only ones anyone understands, outside of the natural sciences and a few other areas.

How easily are these considerations balanced with the clear desire to capture a popular readership?

In my (fairly extensive) experience there is no problem in reaching an

audience of school children, working people, urban "underclass" and people generally with the kind of things I write and talk about. On the other hand, most of it would appear to be unintelligible gibberish in editorial offices and faculty clubs. The reason has to do with the effectiveness of education in destroying the possibility of independent thought, after all, one of its major functions -- again, outside of selected areas, like the natural sciences. I stress that I have plenty of experience. I've given talks and engaged in dialogue all over the place, from urban slums to academic seminars, not only in the West but in the Third World as well. To take an example, I often speak on "talk radio," a largely American institution, as far as I know: a radio "talkmaster" runs a program in which people call in, sometimes with a guest (who is sometimes me). It's usually easy to tell in a few minutes what kind of audience is being reached. If it is an audience of urban Blacks and Latinos, or working people, I generally find that I can skip the easy and obvious things and get to the heart of issues pretty fast. If it is an educated audience, it takes forever to get past the truisms. The reasons are not hard to see. Educated people have been exposed to years of training and indoctrination, reflecting obvious institutional factors, that make truisms unrecognisable, even deeply offensive and scandalous.

I'm exaggerating, of course; space is limited. But the basic point is correct, even obvious. Orwell had much to say about it, to pick one example. Have a look at his (unpublished) preface to Animal Farm for relevant reflections on British intellectual culture (published by Bernard Crick in TLS, about 1972 I think and in the Everyman's edition).

Of course, there are real problems in reaching a general audience -- exactly those Orwell described, in the essay just mentioned. As he observed, those who have power and prestige have no interest in opening the way to independent and critical thought. Another truism. It takes hard and dedicated efforts to break through these institutional constraints, even slightly, a long story I can't go into here.

The malleability of historical 'fact' seems to require a system of denial (disinformation/suppression etc). If this system could be removed, would it then be possible to reach a credible level of objectivity?

I'm afraid I don't really understand this question. It's always hard to find the truth, whether one is working in physics or history. But I don't know of any special "malleability" that infects one enterprise rather than the other. As for objectivity, it's a goal that an honest person seeks to attain and of course never does: we're always working on the basis of tacit assumptions, which, if we are honest, we will try to make as public and obvious as possible so that those who listen to us can compensate as needed. Again, truisms.

Central to all of the above is the question of power structures. Are there any fundamental differences between the structures of today and those of the past?

The power structures today are radically different from those of the past.

simply have a look at some recent World Bank and UNCTAD figures on the percentage of world production and "trade" (much of it not trade but intrafirm transfers) in the hands of Transnational Corporations (basically, private dictatorships), or the scale of unregulated finance capital. The figures are remarkable and reflect important changes in the nature of power. Furthermore, as the financial press is quick to point out, new forms of governance are coalescing around these extraordinary centres of private power, all of this a major shift towards new forms of totalitarian control and, in my opinion, a significant reversal of a long-term tendency towards the creation and entrenchment of functioning democracy.

Do these power structures depend on at least a sense of polarity to sustain the conditions for their self-preservation?

Any system of power must coerce the general population somehow, another truism, expressed with characteristic lucidity by David Hume, among others. The standard way to do this is a combination of fear (of terrifying enemies) and awe (of grand leaders who protect us from them). The comical display of Western intellectuals during the Gulf crisis was a dramatic example, which would shame people with any ability to distance themselves slightly from their own roles. In that sense, a "sense of polarity" is a natural concomitant of arbitrary power and domination.

Where does such a polar focus exist for the West, now that the Cold War is over?

I've written about this extensively for years. As it became clearer, over a decade ago, that the Great Satan was collapsing, there was a desperate search for replacements: international terrorists, crazed Arabs, Hispanic narcotraffickers, Islamic fundamentalists, rogue states etc. -- all of this executed with the greatest delicacy, of course: thus the Western role in international terrorism, which exceeds any competitors, is utterly excised, including what is laughably called "scholarship"; the world's leading Islamic fundamentalist state (Saudi Arabia) is not part of the plague because they do what we tell them; etc. It's been most amusing to watch the charade, or it would be amusing, if the consequences were not so grim. It's by now being conceded, even publicly sometimes, that the enemy is really the Third World; or more accurately, the general population of the world, which is always seeking "to plunder the rich", as John Foster Dulles lamented while deploring the ability of the "Communists" (meaning anyone who appeals to this base instinct) to gain control over mass movements, something we have no capacity to duplicate, he complained, having failed entirely to "sell" our own high-minded doctrine -- that the rich should plunder the poor -- a public relations failure that has always beset the masters, for some reason.

The recent mutual recognition of Israel and the PLO has been a long and bloody time coming. Do you have any comments on the nature of colonial cartography?

There's a lot to say about this. I've written about it elsewhere. In brief,

what happened is that the US and Israel, which have stood alone against virtually the entire world for over 20 years in opposing a diplomatic settlement in the Middle East (except on their strictly rejectionist terms), have won a great victory. The Oslo Agreement simply endorses the basic doctrines of US-Israeli rejectionism; it is, in fact, a variant of Israel's Allon Plan of 1968. There are good reasons, not very hard to figure out, why the US was able to ram this through in 1993, not before. That's a separate matter. Whether the Palestinians should accept the agreement is also another matter. Given the distribution of power, they may have no alternative. My own view was that they should have done so after Camp David, though that would have meant, as now, abandoning their right to national self-determination, among other claims that the UN has been endorsing (vacuously, since the boss doesn't approve) since December 1948. When Bosnian Muslims finally capitulate, as I suppose they will, the press in Belgrade will doubtless be overwhelmed by euphoria and self-congratulation, not unlike the New York Times today -- for not dissimilar reasons at root, despite the many significant differences.

Should human affairs be seen as linear (i.e. progressive) or as a cyclic (i.e. repetitive/regressive) process?

Neither. I don't believe in grand laws of history. What we understand at all rarely goes beyond truisms -- truisms which, however, take us rather far towards comprehending what is happening. It's the task of the commissar class to make all of this seem impenetrable and complex, again for reasons that are obvious. Motives of careerism and opportunism contribute to the same ends, again for obvious reasons.

Does dissent become more effective when it is legitimised by a position of academic authority, or can it be compromised?

If dissent is more effective if legitimised by an association with power, then it is a fraud and a deception. I try to make that clear as much as I can when I speak and write.

Undergraduate militancy has greatly diminished since its heyday in the 60s. This is clearly disappointing to many younger tutors. Has the same drift towards apathy taken place on American campuses and, if so, do you find this disappointing?

Speaking just of the US, undergraduate "militancy" (by which I mean simply involvement in extra-academic issues of serious human concern) has declined from a very brief moment in the late 1960s, but it is high above the norm from, say, the Second World War until the late 1960s. I just came from a political talk at MIT, where there were maybe 7-800 people, mostly students, with about the same number turned away. 30 years ago, there would have been three people, two of them organisers, the third someone who wanted to kill me and the talk would have been given in a classroom, if we could have gotten that.

The reasons for the decline (to far above the earlier norm) are many, the

most obvious being the serious contraction in the economy. 25 years ago, students felt (and they were right) that they could take some time off to devote themselves to serious human problems without sacrificing their future. Now they know that if they stray slightly from orthodoxy and obedience, they may face even harsher conditions than if they keep their noses to the grindstone -- not an easy range of choices for a young person, especially when the elite adult community offers virtually no support for anything but subordination to power.

At the same time, "militancy" (in the sense indicated) among the general population has grown enormously and is far more deeply rooted than before. Outspoken and articulate opposition to the Vietnam war was narrowly based, in marginal social sectors (such as young students) for the most part. Outspoken and articulate opposition to US atrocities in Central America in the past years has involved far greater numbers of people and much more dedicated involvement, but in the mainstream: one found more in churches in the Midwest and Southwest than in Northeastern universities, more understanding and knowledge too, in fact.

The USA often claims to be 'The Land of the Free'. Why should this sound so ironic?

For good reasons. Mark Twain once observed that "It is by the goodness of God that in our country we have those three unspeakably precious things: freedom of speech, freedom of conscience and the prudence never to practice either of them". Not quite accurate, except with regard to priviledged sectors, to which his comment applies with remarkable precision -- again, for obvious institutional reasons: depart from these norms and you are unlikely to gain privilege, apart from the sort of statistical error one finds in any complex system.

How are your political works received in the USA?

In respectable circles, they are not received at all. They are unknown, apart from ludicrous caricatures that occasionally appear and then become established Truth. Sometimes the long-term effect is quite remarkable; Stalin might have been impressed by some of the achievements.

Among the general public, it is more complex. Despite a virtual blackout, I receive a huge number of invitations to speak from all over the country, with a wide socioeconomic range and audiences are almost invariably enormous. Furthermore, it seems to increase every year. The few other people who are available to respond to such requests have exactly the same experience. It seems to me what we are seeing is a considerable growth in popular dissidence, skepticism, concern and commitment to significant -- even radical -- change, combined with a dramatic decline in such interests and concerns on the part of people who could, if they chose, respond to increasing calls for critical analysis, information, alternative perspectives, independent thinking generally. The reasons are worth exploring; the phenomenon seems clear enough.

Your published output is evenly balanced between the political and the linguistic. Does one subject become prioritised for a time or has the work progressed in parallel?

Hard to say. If the world would go away, I'd be delighted to keep entirely to what are considered my "professional concerns". They are intellectually far more challenging and exciting. However, the world won't go away. I try to do both as much as I can, always disappointed in both (actually more than two) sharply distinct and unrelated areas.

The careful dismantling of behaviourist linguistics in 'Language and Mind' makes the innatist theory of language acquisition immediately convincing. Was this the case at the time?

Since I started thinking about these matters, over 40 years ago, it's seemed obvious that a good part of our knowledge of language simply derives from our nature, just as it is the case with every complex system of the body. No one knows much about onset of puberty, but no sane person doubts that its general course is largely a matter of biological endowment. The reasoning is quite similar in this case. I'd take it for granted that over time this would become widely understood -- we aren't talking about politics and ideology, after all, in which there is a much more real stake in deceit and falsification, given the power interests. In answer to your question, what seemed to me rather trivial observations were considered outlandish at the time, less so over the years. By now, at least among serious researchers, the only question is exactly what aspects of language (and other cognitive capacities) derive from innate endowment, the assumption being that fundamental features are effectively invariant for the species, as is being increasingly shown.

From the number of books available on the subject, it would seem that your original model for generative grammar has undergone some significant adaptations. Does your original outline still hold strong?

The field is alive. Consequently, there are constant changes as understanding progresses. Lectures I'm giving right now question assumptions I've held for many years, seeking deeper explanations for phenomena that have long been observed and the huge array of empirical materials that have been coming into view as theoretical understanding allows entirely new questions to be asked. Over the past decade or so, the expansion of empirical materials, previously unknown and by now well enough understood so that

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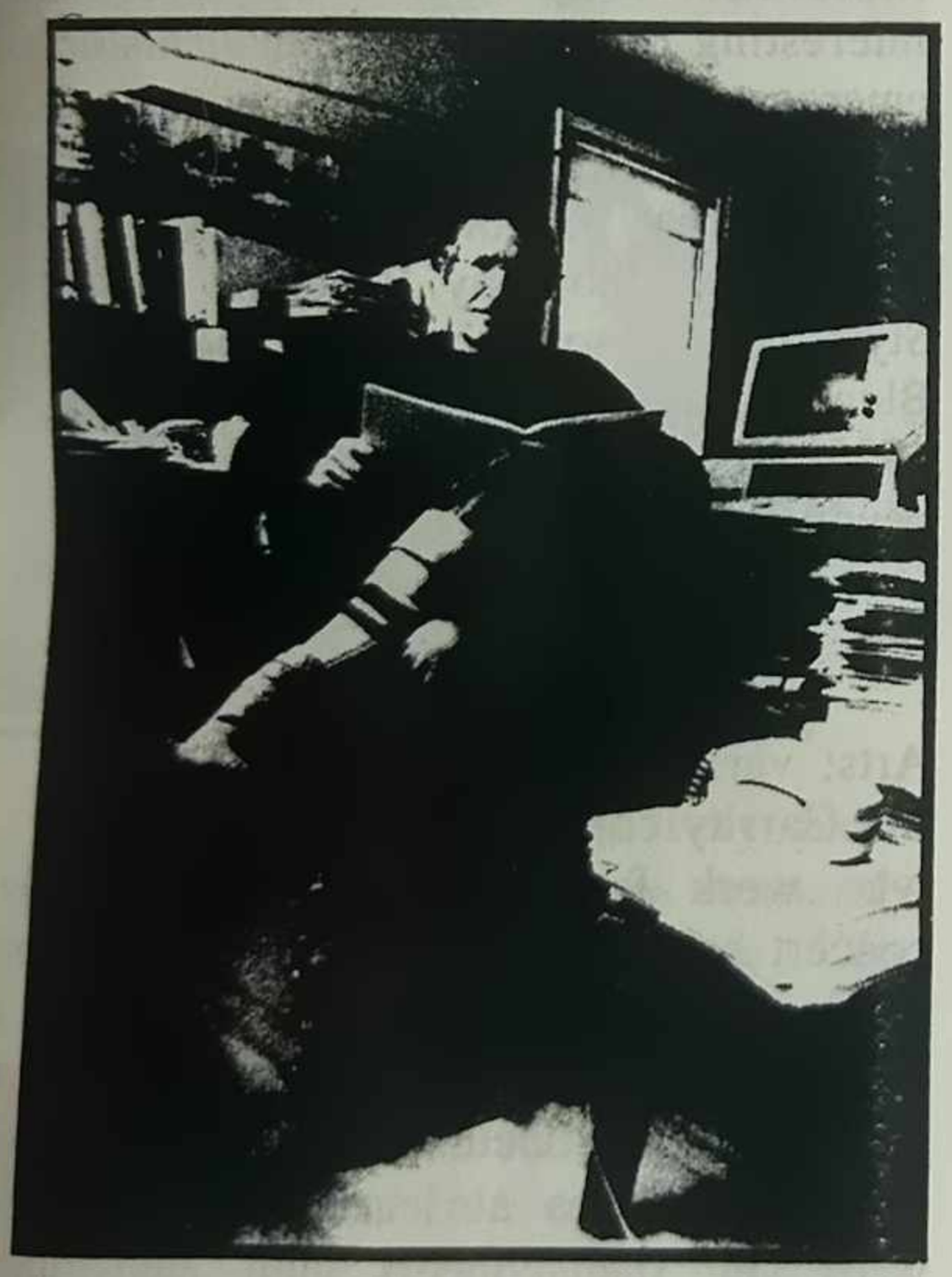
theoretical work can seriously consider them, has been truly dramatic, surely more so than ever before. The changes of theory also seem dramatic to people within the discipline. I suspect from outside they would not be very noticeable. In that respect, the "original outline" hasn't changed a lot.

Would you accept that your theory of Universal Grammar was the first successful synthesis of linguistics and philosophy?

I wouldn't say that, for many reasons. First, it's not my theory. I



don't own it. My own views are constantly changing, every time I have a meeting with one of my graduate students, for example. Theories are collective endeavours. Second, I don't think what has been accomplished can really be called "a synthesis of linguistics and philosophy". It sheds light on concerns of linguistics and philosophy, some traditional, some new and sometimes brings them together in unforeseen ways -- which are, furthermore, highly controversial. That aside, I don't think that the innovations of the last years are more dramatic than those of the 17th Century, much less so perhaps, for reasons I've discussed at length.

Do you read fiction and, if so, which authors first come to mind?

Sure when I can. Since as a matter of principle I keep my personal life to myself, I won't go into the matter any more fully than this.

What project(s) are you working on at the moment?

Just sent off a book on the contemporary international order and its origins, developing themes I've discussed before, with new materials and (I hope) new understanding. Am lecturing now on some new and fairly far-reaching ideas about the theory of language that have been coming into view during the last few years, bits and pieces already published and lots of exciting work underway by many people. Am in the midst of a series of publications, some out, some circulating, some in lectures and "in the head", which try to rethink leading questions of philosophy of language and mind in what seems to me a far more "naturalistic" (and proper) way and more of the same. About the usual.

Intro & Questions: Nick Watson